

Marketing the Performing Arts: Efficacy of Web 2.0 Social Networks

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Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have grown rapidly with the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 applications (Hausmann, 2012b). Increasingly, non-traditional communication tools are being sought to engage with stakeholders. Given the prevalence of social media adoption, researchers examine whether this approach is a more relevant and useful one to promoting the performing arts. There is minimal research on this concept. This paper explores the utility of social media for performing arts organizations to reach and engage potential audience members. The results of a case study of the effectiveness of viral marketing using Web2.0 social media for a small performing arts organization is presented.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic marketing has become significantly more important due to the increasing competition in the arts industry. The last four decades have witnessed a change in marketing practice in the area of performing arts organizations (PAOs). The emphasis is shifting away from product development to audience development in order to guarantee the sustainability of such organizations. (Rentschler, et al., 2002) Efforts to enhance audience development focus on relationship marketing for customer retention. Moreover, research (Waters, et al., 2009) indicates that social media and, in particular, Facebook, has found traction in non-profit organizations such as museums and theaters as an effective communication tool to increase their visibility and to build stronger relationships with their stakeholders. Even with the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 applications by not-for-profit organizations, the adoption of social media such as Facebook and other Web 2.0 social media is still lagging behind that of for-profit organizations. (Waters & Feneley, 2013)

SOCIAL NETWORKS

There are more ways that nonprofit organizations can enhance relationships with the consumer and raise public awareness due to social media becoming more prevalent and dominant in the cultural services sector of the economy. Social media platforms empower users to innovatively and efficiently promote new and useful tools for non-profit cultural driven sectors. (Lazzeretti, et al., 2015). PAOs, such as theaters and orchestras, tend to exhibit high degrees of experience and credence attributes, due to the inherently abstract and intangible nature of the experience offered by these organizations. In most cases, attendees can only assess the quality of the performance after 'consumption' (experience attributes), and in some cases, even ex-post judgment of quality is difficult (credence attributes) (Helm & Kuhl, 2006). The dominance of experience and credence characteristics in the arts leads to heightened uncertainty and perceived risk. It has been suggested that these two factors can be effectively reduced through use of social media viral messaging and electronic word-of-mouth (Hausmann, 2012). Some research suggests that leveraging corporate social responsibility initiatives is another appropriate approach to positively impact consumer perception of quality in cultural service industries (Creyer & William, 1997; Andreini, et al., 2014).

The rapid technological growth extends options to PAOs through websites, blogs, and other social media to reach their existing, as well as potential, customers. Three-quarters of those who use the internet also use some form of social media network (Nielsen, 2010). What are the possibilities for arts institutions to utilize this platform and extend their traditional forms of marketing outreach?

With promotion and communication, the effectiveness of social media can be looked at in terms of boundary-free, instant and a broad reach. (Jansen, et al., 2009). It has been suggested that Social Media such as Facebook extends this concept of Word-of-Mouth harnessing the connectivity of the internet. Since word of mouth can go out to unlimited viewers it can be very efficient in distributing word of mouth (Allsop, et al., 2007). A significant piece of social media is the ability to conduct research (Poynter, 2010; Hettler, 2010) which goes to market research and innovation management. Alongside that is reputation management, which refers to the ability to manage and support the perceptions and interest of the consumers.

The (Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN), 2015) findings suggest that on average the email lists have grown more than eleven percentage points over the past year. For non-profit organizations, in general, Facebook and Twitter activity has shown growth of forty-two percentage and thirty-seven percentage respectively. Overall, the reliance on social media for non-profits has grown three times faster compared with email usage.

However, regardless of the evidence of widespread adoption of Social Media, in particular, Facebook, in terms of community building and information sharing, there appears to be little evidence on the use and effectiveness of Social media as a platform for the marketing of the arts, especially in the domain of non-profits. This is contrary to research which indicates that traditional marketing activities such as customer orientation and regulation building as deployed by business organizations are also relevant for non-profit organizations as well (Gainer & Padanyi, 2002). The emphasis on experiential marketing has gained credibility in practice of retail and event marketing. There is evidence supporting its potential application to the arts industry. In his research, Petkus (2004) argues that the experiential marketing framework proposed by Pine & Gilmore (1999) has high relevance to cultural organizations. The essence of a successful experiential marketing campaign is to engage the consumer. The versatility of social media platforms can effectively create meaningful engagement between art patrons and PAOs. For instance, Preece (2011) documents the recent practice of incorporate video streaming into websites dedicated to promoting performance arts, as a case of a successful strategy for audience engagement.

German theatres are examples of PAOs using Social Media, as their use of social media applications grows. Basic marketing for theatres are 1) promotion and communication; 2) word of mouth; 3) market research and innovation management and reputation management. (Hausmann, 2012a)

In the specific context of museums in Germany, research indicates that there the marketing of the arts has been slow to adopt the word of mouth marketing. This appears counter-intuitive especially given that

this is a strength of social media. Further, since theater and museums share the same product characteristic such as non-tangibility and non-standardization, social media emerges as a viable marketing channel (Hausmann, 2012a). In the specific context of performing arts or theater, Hausmann (2012, 2016) suggests that existence between the various social media marketing modalities and theater.

CASE STUDY

We conducted a case study to examine the potential of social media for marketing of theaters and theatrical performances. We explored the potential of social media, especially Facebook, to attract audience members in the context of a small non-profit performing arts organization in the United States.

Darpan theatre is a non-profit theater organization registered in Massachusetts. Since it is a small non-profit community theater, Darpan needed to minimize its marketing costs. In order to market Darpan had three choices; 1) use traditional marketing media such as print mail, brochure, posters, paid mailing lists and phone lists; 2) utilize their own website and emails; c) Use Web 2.0 social network(s), in particular, Facebook. These three options have been summarized in Table1 below.

TABLE 1

Marketing Options	
Option 1: Traditional	Mailers, Posters, Telephone System, Bulletin Boards
Option 2. Pre Web 2.0	Website, Emails
Option 3: Web 2.0	Social Networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

In terms of cost, the traditional approach is the most expensive since sending mailers and posters involves significant printing and mailing cost. If a mailing list must be acquired that adds to the cost as well. Posting on the organization's own website is free but posting on other organizations' websites usually comes at a cost. Similarly, while sending an email is very low cost, there can be a significant cost to access a list of email addresses that can be sent to make announcements through an email blast. This is usually a paid service. The final option of social network marketing is freely available with a minimal cost factor.

Tickets to the play "The Legend of Emperor Ashoka" were sold through Eventbrite or at the venue itself. Eventbrite is one of the larger event technology platforms that host event webpage and tickets sales. It is low-cost compared to some larger commercial ticketing companies such as Ticketmaster. Event promotion and ticket sales can be done either as free or paid. In the free option, Eventbrite permits the listing of your event with a nominal percentage fee from ticket sales. The paid options give you access to their marketing service.

Darpan used the default free Eventbrite ticketing platform. In addition, they used their Facebook page and the page where the event was presented. Finally, a web-link to buy tickets was inserted on Darpan's website. Potential patrons could procure tickets either by finding it on the Eventbrite website or by hyperlinking through the Facebook posting on the Darpan website.

When buying tickets through Eventbrite, a simple question was asked, "How did you hear about "The Legend of Emperor Ashoka?" The choices were a) Facebook; b) Email; c) word of mouth; d) the organizers (Darpan Theatre) website; e) other Events; and Other.

The organizers of the theatrical play, *The Legend of Emperor Ashoka*, staged it over four shows. The audience capacity for that particular venue was 150 seats. The four performances were sold out. Thus, 600 tickets were sold. Of these tickets sold, approximately 500 were sold via Eventbrite and the rest were sold at the venue. The total number of online ticket orders were 242.

DATA COLLECTION

Every ticket order whether it was through Eventbrite or at the venue had the patron choose among the various options presented (mentioned above) regarding their main source of awareness of the event. The first choice presented in the list was the “Darpan Theater”, which was the organizers’ website from which patrons could hyperlink to the event page on Eventbrite. The next choice: Emails, was a combination of contacts already available with Darpan Theater as well as a routine email blast from the venue management for all their events. The third medium was Social Media- Facebook. It was a combination of Darpan’s Facebook page, an event page on Facebook on the venue’s home page, and postings on other Facebook community pages. Then in the list was “Other events”. This is a physical visit by patrons to a performance venue they chanced upon display ads and posters. “Other websites” included various arts and event websites where events could be posted for free. Word of mouth was a patron getting information about the event from another person. Finally, “Other”, included free community bulletin boards and selected local libraries. The breakdown of the ticket order per each of these information sources is presented below in Table 2.

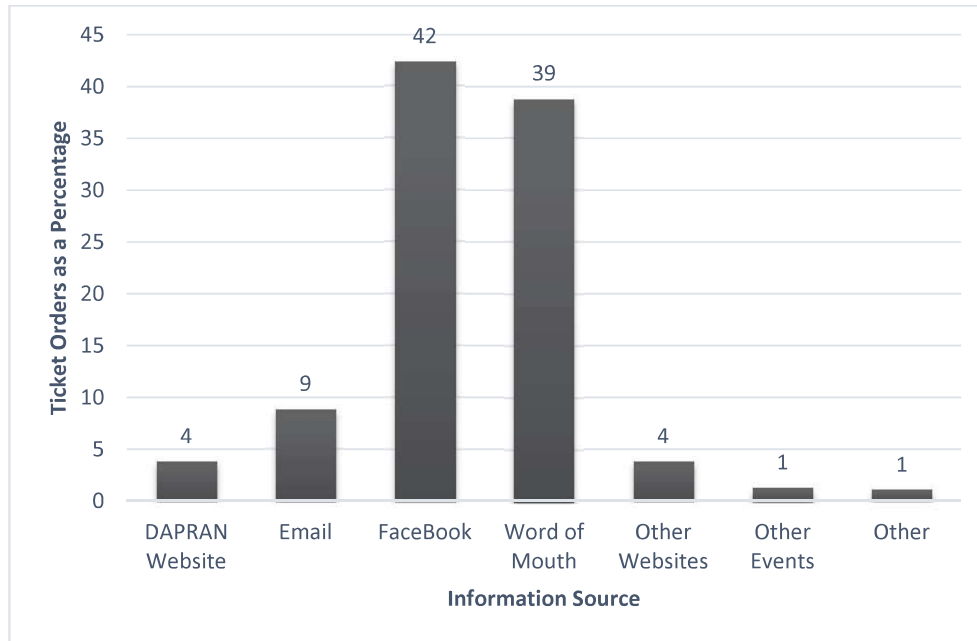
TABLE 2

PROMOTIONAL MEDIUM	TICKET ORDERS
DARPAN Website	9
Email	21
Facebook	102
Word of Mouth	93
Other Websites	9
Other Events	3
Other	5
Total orders= 242	

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The data reveal that both Facebook and traditional Word of Mouth together are responsible for about 80 percent of the ticket orders. All of the other options were mentioned by a maximum of five percent of ticket buyers. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1
TICKET ORDERS AND INFORMATION SOURCES**



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Darpan Theater is a non-profit community theater with a limited budget and did not use any paid information source to reach out to attract an audience. The operating environment of a community theater is constrained by small financial budgets and lack of commercial marketing clout. Word-of-mouth is the most viable approach to attract an audience. This is why this channel scores high along with social media. However, if one controls for this then, then social media stands out as the key factor in the marketing of this event in the form of viral and electronic word of mouth marketing. The success of Facebook (social media) technology can be attributed to broad and deep reach along with speed of information dissemination (Jansen, et al., 2009). Word-of-mouth had a 39 percentage share in impacting ticket orders. Word-of-mouth has often been referred to as “Viral” marketing. Given, the intrinsic nature of social media technologies such as instantaneous broad reach, innovations such as Facebook help promulgate a viral marketing phenomenon. Word-of-mouth and Facebook can work as a double helix spurring each other to create a viral marketing effect. It could be precisely this aspect that enabled Darpan to achieve about 80 % of their ticket orders through these two factors alone. Both being free and self- spreading.

Academics have acknowledged the importance of not only marketing products and services but such areas of marketing the arts as well. Applying marketing concepts and principles particularly via the use of social media technologies is of interest. The patrons have ever-changing tastes, which is one of the challenges facing the arts along with inconsistency in buying behavior and reductions in funding (Kemp, 2015)

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